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BLOOD TIDE

A NOVEL

A thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

TEAGAN KESSLER

May 2022

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ABSTRACT

This is a work of fiction about a detective who moves to Louisiana to outrun a tragic incident in his past. In Louisiana, he catches a case involving the sheriff's daughter, who has gone missing. Later found dead, the woman's life comes to light through the detective's investigation, all while he battles his PTSD.

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CHAPTER I

The sun was waning. The heat was not. Deputy Shane Riley guzzled water from a near-empty bottle, his second in an hour and he still didn't have to piss. His childhood had been baked in the kilns of Arizona summers, but he was unaccustomed to the syrupy heat of Louisiana in July.

"If it gets any hotter, I'm gonna have to salt my nuts, 'cause the damn things are already roasted," said Deputy Luke Engleman.

"Hell, Luke, I'm convinced your mother was a poet and your father a foul-mouthed sailor," Riley said.

Engleman grinned and slicked sweat off the back of his thick neck. His hand came away dripping. "You shut your whore mouth. My daddy was a proud Marine, just like me, not some seasick squid."

"My apologies, Sergeant." Riley found the deputy unconvinced. He added, "Ooh-rah?"

"That's more like it. But seriously, what the hell are we doing out here? You and I both know we ain't finding shit. They dump bodies in bayous for a reason."

"Maybe we'll find him before the gators do."

A deep laugh accompanied Engleman's splashing footsteps through the shallow water. "What're you? Six feet? Mostly muscle? I mean, not one-hundred percent Grade-A Marine Corps muscle, but muscle. And you've been here almost a year? And you're still afraid of gators?"

“Average gator weighs around seven hundred pounds and is about thirteen feet long,” Riley said, poking at the tall grass with a stick. A flash of metal caught his eye. He gripped the stick like a driver and golfed the beer can far into the marsh.

“Further proof that National Geographic is nightmare fuel.”

“Like you’re afraid of anything, Marine.” Riley didn’t bother mentioning that the deputy was a former Marine. He’d gotten that lecture already.

Engleman stopped, leaning against his own stick. “Women,” he said, deep brown eyes solemn. “Most terrifying creature on the planet.”

Riley shook his head, sending beads of sweat rolling down his temple. He tried not to tense up, wondering for the hundredth time what Engleman would think if he found out Riley was bisexual. Engleman was a good man, but Riley was still a bisexual man—and a cop—in the Deep South.

“Come on, Shane. Haven’t you ever had your heart broken by a pretty girl?”

“Do you ever shut up?” There was no heat in Riley’s words. “I’ve known you almost a year and I’m pretty sure you’ve been talking ninety percent of it.”

“Had to do something to get you to loosen up and talk to me.”

Riley went quiet. Engleman sighed.

“Sorry, man.”

Riley shrugged.

“I mean it,” Engleman said, his loud voice muted. He didn’t reach out when Riley kept walking. He’d made that mistake before. “I only know what I read in the papers about what you went through in San Francisco, but I’ve seen the look you get sometimes. You may not have been in combat, but you got eyes like you’ve seen some shit. I don’t mean to make light of that.”

Riley ignored the serrated memories and focused on turning the tide of red into the calm blue water off the dock by his new home. He mostly succeeded, but he was bothered to find his hand pressed against his belly, the rigid scar too familiar through the thin material of his deputy uniform.

Engleman pretended he didn't notice the gesture. As he always did.

"Fucker tried to kill me. Tried," Riley said. "Didn't."

It was as close as the two had come to talking about Riley's final case as a California detective, and Engleman nodded in solemn thanks. He was a patient man.

They walked in silence, Riley letting his hand brush against the softness of the cattails standing still in the breezeless, stagnant air. The plants looked like hot dogs that had gone moldy, and his mind drifted to what might be lurking in the back of his fridge. He'd been working a lot, trying to keep his mind busy and centered in the present, not the painful past.

"You know the biggest gator ever recorded was nineteen-point-two feet long?" Riley said, swinging at another empty beer. He whiffed it, saw his partner fail at hiding a smirk, and felt his cheeks find a brighter shade of red. "They found that beast right here in your wonderful home state."

Engleman laughed. "Damn, dude. You suck at golf. And we have got to get you a life."

"Start tonight?" Riley asked, checking his watch before stripping it off his sweaty wrist and shoving it in his pocket. The bare patch of reddened skin felt blessedly cool for a moment before the heat attacked it and ruined the relief. He'd murder someone for a cool shower.

"I like the sound of that. Beers at the Pontoon?"

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They turned and started back the way they’d come along the narrow finger of land between the expanses of water rippling on either side. Coming up empty didn’t sit well, but searching for a convicted felon who may or may not even be dead wasn’t a heartbreaker of a case. They were only out there because of an anonymous tip with few details. Martin Charmont was a lowlife drug addict who spent too much time on the riverboats and probably owed the wrong people money. He might be dead, but it was just as likely that he’d skipped town. Hell, he might have called in the tip himself. A surprising number of people still faked their own deaths, even if the digital age made it much, much harder to disappear.

The deputies exchanged a look as they approached the road, cluttered with police vehicles, including two ATVs. It was just after six, and they were the last pair back.

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said, tugging at the end of her sleek blond ponytail and letting a few stray hairs drop into the dead, sun-bleached grass at the road's edge.

“Marina's?” Engleman repeated. “As in Markum's daughter?”

Prosser nodded, his red face concerned as he squinted against the dying sun. The sunset was putting a show, sinking below the horizon and dragging a blaze of oranges and reds with it. But no one saw it. Houma, the seat of Terrebonne Parish, had crime rates far above the national averages, both for property and violent crime. It wasn't San Francisco, but it also wasn't a podunk sleepy Southern city full of Mayberry types.

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Riley winced, knowing Eugenia Markum was in declining health. Early stages of Alzheimer's. He couldn't imagine how the sheriff was still upright, given the circumstances, the terrifying possibilities.

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“You drop everything you got on your plate right now,” Markum ordered. His voice was firm but not loud. Nothing about the trim, small-statured sheriff was ever loud. “I want you all over this.”

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Marina Markum had been at the table that night, practically still shivering after returning home from college in Minnesota and bursting with stories about a recent pond hockey tournament. It was a story Shane had already heard—the night before, in a bar down by the water. He'd been out solo, looking for a drink and some company, and the two ladies talking hockey had caught his attention. He'd bought drinks for both young women, but it was Marina's clear blue eyes that kept him in the three-way conversation until it became just two.

He shifted as the car bumped over the cracked pavement, uncomfortable with the distinct memory of his heart blocking his throat when he'd walked into the Markums' large antebellum home and realized the woman in his bed the night before was sitting at the sheriff's antique dining table. Marina hadn't mentioned her father, and Riley hadn't mentioned his job. Their eyes met, but Marina did nothing but raise an eyebrow and smile as he shook her hand—a hand that had explored every inch of him less than twenty-four hours earlier.

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Teagan Kessler is a novel and short story writer. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Threepenny Review*, *Washington Square Review*, *Bright Flash Literary Review* and *CafeLit*. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from Saint Bonaventure University (2005).